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ABSTRACT

Mentoring individuals who are gifted, talented, and creative, but somewhat emotionally sensitive is a challenging and provocative arena. Several reasons individuals experience heightened sensitivity include: lack of nurturing, abuse, alcoholism in the family, low self-esteem, unrealistic parental expectations, and parental pressure to achieve. Alexithymia is defined as a condition in which children do not seem to experience emotions, or the emotions are expressed through physical symptoms (i.e., ulcers, high blood pressure, and headaches). How this condition effects individuals in adulthood is described. Individual differences in sensitivity to feedback may result from learned differences in mental models of the self. This affects the ways in which individuals function. The paper discusses several defensive behaviors of emotionally sensitive individuals and explains how mentors can best respond to them. Eleven specific suggestions for mentors working with this population are provided. Coping skills that mentors can teach to emotionally sensitive people are listed. (MKA)

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Mentoring Emotionally Sensitive Individuals

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Abstract

Mentoring individuals is a difficult, but rewarding task. Mentoring individuals who are gifted, talented and creative, but somewhat emotionally sensitive is a challenging and provocative arena. This paper discusses the " emotionally sensitive" individual and describes the struggles and difficulties involved in working with this group.

In mentoring, the older, wiser, more experienced individuals attempts to assist the younger protege in their chosen field of endeavors. The mentor has much to share and can assist the younger individual toward their goals and hopes, dreams and ambitions. The mentoring relationship facilitates the process and the mentor's integrity and personality assists in the growth and development of the protege.

Mentoring the gifted/talented/creative individual is obviously a bit more complex. The gifted has high intellectual and cognitive prowess and may have already been described as a " genius ". The talented individual may have piano, violin or cello skills and be heading toward a symphony league. The creative individual may have already composed, written, painted or sculpted, and their skills may be increasing daily.

The "emotionally sensitive" individual may be hesitant to enter into a mentoring relationship, or they may be reticent to receive criticism, or even constructive guidance or advice. They often cringe when comments are directed toward them. They withdraw when others offer salient suggestions or indicate areas of improvement. This person may have interpersonal difficulties, or they may simple be inordinately responsive to the comments of others. They may care "too much" about the reaction of others and the feedback that they receive from authority figures or significant others.

There may be several reasons for the heightened sensitivity. There may have been a lack of nurturing, caring individuals in the past, or there may have been a lack of positive reinforcement in the past. Clinically, the protege may have been abused as a child, or come from a dysfunctional family. Some individuals had a very difficult adolescence and still carry the scars of that time period. Alcoholism is another disease which takes it's toll on the growth and development of the individual. Low self esteem, low self concept and low self worth may also be implicated.

Sadly, in childhood and in adolescence, some parents place unrealistic expectations on their children. Mothers and fathers can be martinets and expect more from children than they are capable of delivering.

Some parents experience a great deal of gratification from the accomplishments of their children and push them harder toward greater achievements. The end result is a person who is achieving for others, rather than for themselves. They may, indeed feel that the mentor is also pushing them harder, and faster toward a Nobel Prize that they have no desire of winning. They may simply want to be "left alone". Parental vicariousness have a very deterimental effect on the emotional growth and development of an individual. Living vicariously through children may be detrimental to the children in the long run.

Alexithymia refers to a condition in which children do not seem to experience emotions or the emotions are expressed via somatic complaints (ulcers, high blood pressure, headaches).

They may be emotionally sensitive, yet be unable to express it. In adulthood, they may procure a minimal amount of confidence in themselves, thus react inordinately when criticized. They may very much be seeking acceptance and warmth, rather than criticism. Some individuals are simply overinvested in one domain or area. Their music, art, writing or whatever may be the most important element of their lives. The more overinvested one is in a certain area, the more sensitive they may be regarding that domain. If the mentor is not perspicacious, he or she may probe too quickly or too readily into a very delicate area.

Individual differences in sensitivity to feedback may result from learned differences in mental models of the self. That is, research has shown that some children and adults make "entity" attributions about self-characteristics, while others make "incremental" attributions (Dweck, Hong & Chiu, 1993). To make an entity attribution about an important talent that is being mentored would mean that an individual believes that the talent is a fixed quantity that he or she possesses. On the other hand, to make an incremental attribution about a relevant talent would mean that an individual believes that the trait is a malleable quality that can improve with effort, practice, and guidance.

Children who hold entity theories have been shown to make more global statements about themselves in response to negative feedback (Dweck et al., 1993). For example, they might respond to criticism with statements like "I'm just not smart enough."

They have also been shown to predict less change over time in personality traits (Erdley & Dweck, 1993). Individuals who hold this type of mental model of themselves will probably not be able to focus on the behavioral changes suggested by constructive criticism. Instead, they may hear threats to their self-concept. Since the mental model they hold assumes that they possess a fixed amount of talent, criticism indicates that this amount is, immutably, less than what they desire it to be.

Mentors may find that individuals who have learned this "entity" concept of their abilities respond to attempts at guidance, which they see as threatening, with defensive behaviors. These behaviors can be frustrating to the mentor if not understood. Two forms of defensive behaviors that may occur are self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978) and defensive pessimism (Norem & Cantor, 1986). In self-handicapping, an individual deliberately creates an obstacle to performance, in order to avoid revealing the actual "amount" of talent he or she possesses.

For example, an individual may inexplicably fail to practice or study before an important performance or test, suddenly citing other commitments that were not all that important in the past. Although it disappoints and may even anger the mentor, this excuse allows the individual to preserve the cherished belief that the needed amount of talent is there and would have been revealed, but for the handicap of poor preparation.

A second type of defensive behavior that may be displayed by individuals who fear that the fixed amount of their talent is not enough is defensive pessimism (Norem & Cantor, 1986).

This behavior also occurs before an important performance that might reveal their "deficiency". Although it may not be so disappointing to the mentor as self-handicapping, defensive pessimism can be most irritating. In defensive pessimism, an individual who has demonstrated considerable ability in the past pessimistically claims that he or she will not be able to do well in an upcoming performance. Despite assurances to the contrary, the individual persists in this claim. Naturally, the mentor who views his or her role as providing encouragement can become frustrated with continued attempts to bolster the protege, all of which are rejected as the individual stubbornly clings to this unwarranted belief.

Recognizing these defensive behaviors as indications that an individual has an "entity" rather than an "incremental" model of his or her own abilities, a perceptive mentor will react not to the defenses but to the model. That is, efforts should focus on disproving the belief that ability is fixed and constant, and may be revealed as deficient.

There are a few suggestions for working with emotionally sensitive individuals. These are :

a) Be patient.
b) Start with, and praise the good.
c) Be diplomatic, cordial and congenial.
d) Make global statement, then after rapport is developed, move to specifics.
e) Allow plenty of time.
f) Proceed in slow incremental steps.
g) Validate past experiences.
h) Be gentle.
i) Discuss one's standards and how realistic they may be
j) Look for emotional strengths- Sensitivity is a Strength that can be employed.
k) Allow the individual to proceed at their own pace.

Some teachers, coaches, mentors and counselors may see an increase in emotionally sensitive individuals. It is hypothesized that we currently are encountering a cohort of individuals that may have grown up in a single parent home, or in a home wherein both parents worked, or schooled in an environment where teachers provided little positive feedback or reinforcement as they were too busy dealing with behavioral problems and kids with academic problems.

Mentors may perceive an amount of potential in an individual and thus initiate a mentoring relationship. As time passes, it becomes apparent that there is some hesitancy or reticence about the individual. A sensitive mentor may then make the necessary adjustments. Timing, pacing and one's approach may be modified. The competent mentor will recognize the "emotionally sensitive" individual and assist him or her accordingly. This individual may simply need a low key approach or a more emotive, feeling approach.

Of critical important is the teaching of coping skills- the mentor can teach the following :

a) coping with failure- We all encounter it at some time or other
b) coping with difficult, caustic, abrasive, people.
c) dealing with set backs
d) dealing with change and transitions and stress
e) coping with conflicting demands
f) coping with the insensitivities of others.

Given much of the above, the mentor can be successful with kindness, a tender heart and a patient approach.

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